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Beyond East Meets West: Space and Simultaneity in Post-Millennial Western Sufi Auto-Biographical Writings

Marcia Hermansen

The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history.... The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of Simultaneity: We are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.¹ (Foucault)

In this chapter I will analyze select examples of recent biographical narratives written by Sufis from Western backgrounds. I wish to explore whether these autobiographies, written by contemporary individuals who have “reverted”² to Islam and are engaged in traditional Islamic Sufi practices, draw on the conventions and expectations of spiritual autobiography in Western contexts, as well as the extent to which they reflect Islamicate literary elements. This having been established—in what sense can such Sufi autobiographies be related to “Islamic” themes or contexts.

This topic was chosen to allow reflection and theorizing on the broader theme of this volume: “Sufism East and West: Mystical Islam and Cross-cultural Exchange between the West and the Muslim World” in terms of the manifestations as well as the challenges or limitations of such exchanges. The reason that I refer to Foucault in the epigraph to this chapter is to signal a theoretical framework for this argument that goes beyond what might previously have been framed as an encounter of the West with the East. Alternatively, I suggest that these recent Western Sufi autobiographical works reflect the changing experiences of spatiality anticipated by Foucault “as a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein” in a way that invites to consider the nature of experience “beyond East meets West”.

Theory of Biography and Autobiography

¹ Michel Foucault, “In Other Spaces” in *Diacritics*, 16, 22-27, 1986. 22.

² “Revert” is a term preferred by some Westerners who have embraced Islam since according to Islamic theology everyone is born “muslim” in the sense of being “submitted to God”.

The theme of Western Sufi autobiography provokes us to consider both classical Islamic exemplars of the genre and the challenges and limitations of self-written life narratives. Literary scholars of biography alert us to the fact that a range of questions may be posed regarding this genre of writing—which narrative person is the text composed in, is any specific audience explicitly or implicitly addressed, how does the author compose and reshape the decisive elements of the life to be told so as to import a meaning to the overall narrative?

The category of autobiographical writing is itself complicated and has been recently criticized as being primarily or almost exclusively conceived in Western terms to the neglect of other cultures and traditions. An academic manual of literary approaches to biographical writing summarizes some of these recent critiques:

If gender studies exposed autobiography's individualist self as a phenomenon of male self-fashioning, postcolonial theory further challenged its universal validity. While autobiography was long considered an exclusively Western genre, postcolonial approaches to autobiography/ life writing have significantly expanded the corpus of autobiographical writings and provided a perspective which is critical of both the eurocentrism of autobiography genre theory and the concepts of selfhood in operation.³

In response to criticisms that the concept of autobiography suggests an approach to agency, control, and even the self, that is male-dominated and West-centered, scholars influenced by post-modern or post-colonial theory have proposed an alternative genre category of “life narratives”.⁴ This proves helpful to our present inquiry since several of the works that I will consider are only partially autobiographical or may be implicitly biographical while not directly conforming to the usual expectations of autobiography.

It must further be noted that while associated with Eastern and Islamic elements, the narratives under consideration here are hardly “subaltern”; they rather are those of privileged Westerners—high achievers who chose to opt out—opt out of what? These accounts seem to suggest the flight from a disenchanted alienating world afflicted by usually consumerism and meaninglessness. Thus we find in a number of strains of contemporary Western Sufism a

³ From Helga Schwalm, “Autobiography” in *The Living Handbook of Narratology* <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/autobiography> Retrieved March 6, 2016.

⁴ Donie Smith and Julia Watson, *A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives: Reading Autobiography* 2nd ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010, 4.

counterpublic element⁵ that also needs to be scrutinized.

Western Sufi Autobiography as an Evolving Genre

Western spiritual writing about Sufism has a past that provide several models for these authors. In particular, I would consider works such as Gurdjieff's *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (1963 [English translation]) to be an early exemplar.⁶ The next Western Sufi autobiographical classics: Reshad Feild's *The Last Barrier* (1976) and Ian Dallas' *Book of Strangers* (1972) also established a distinctive tone and form of the esoteric and initiatory Sufi quest novel.

In a previous article I noted that subsequent to these early Sufi quest novels of the 1970s, the 1990s saw the beginning of a new trend of "Western Sufi conversion narratives"—book length Sufi accounts⁷ such as Muhyideen Shakoor's *The Writing on the Water: Chronicles of a Seeker on the Islamic Sufi Path*⁸ and Nooruddin Durkee's *Embracing Islam*.⁹ These latter examples are both more explicitly Islamic while being less wide in circulation and appeal than earlier works.

Thus we can trace a development from earlier Sufi quest novels such as those of Gurdjieff, Field, and Dallas, to subsequent Sufi "conversion" accounts. This current chapter, however, will focus on post-millennial Sufi biographical writings that include dimensions of the spiritual travelogue or alternatively, incorporate manuals or instructive didactic material as a supplement to life narration.

Who are Western Sufis?

⁵ See Marcia Hermansen, "American Sufis and American Islam: From Private Spirituality to the Public Sphere" in *Islamic Movements and Islam in the Multicultural World: Islamic Movements and Formation of Islamic Ideologies in the Information Age*. Kazan: Russian Federation, Kazan Federal University Publishing House, 2014, 189-208.

⁶ G. I. Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963.

⁷ On Sufi movements in America see Marcia K. Hermansen, "In the Garden of American Sufi movements: Hybrids and Perennials" in *New Trends and Developments in the World of Islam*, ed. Peter Clarke, (London: Luzac Oriental Press, 1996), 149-172.

⁸ Muhyiddin Shakoor, *The Writing on the Water: Chronicles of a Seeker on the Islamic Sufi Path* (Element Books, 1994).

⁹ Noorudeen Durkee, *Embracing Islam: being some extracts from a tale of Exile* (Virginia: Green Mountain School, 1993).

The continuing expansion of the number of publications and the generic variety of Western Sufi literatures, including biographical writings, has been noted by several studies.¹⁰ The Sufi presence in the “West” is of course relatively recent. In my initial study of this phenomenon written in the 1990s I coined the metaphor of perennials, hybrids, and transplants in a Sufi garden.¹¹ Each of these varieties of Sufism still exists—but their relative weight in term of numbers has shifted and, in addition, with the demographic and political changes in both the West and the Muslim World, a further category of Western Sufism emerged which I term “authenticity”. The rationale for presenting below a brief background to the development of Sufism in America is to lay out the context in which the authors of the works reviewed here are situated. Kabeer Faye might be said to span the entire range from universalist/eclectic, to hybrid, to authenticity Sufism while the others enter the trajectory at the hybrid stage, except for Keller who seems to have been exposed to other views while immediately gravitating to *fiqh*-oriented Sufism—since his own physical engagement begins in the Middle East itself.

The earlier waves of the appropriation or embrace of Islamic Sufi currents in the West, typified by figures such as Rene Guenon (d. 1951) and Frithjof Schuon (d. 1998), have become known as Traditionalism or Perennialism. Scholars such as Mark Sedgwick have demonstrated their intellectual indebtedness, not only to Islamic Sufism, but also to currents in contemporary European esotericism, for example, Theosophy or other forms of esotericism. Central to Traditionalism was the idea of a perennial Urreligion—the Tradition behind all authentic religion.¹² Even earlier in its initial presence in the West was the Sufi Order of Inayat Khan (d. 1927) which also espoused religious universalism while not being specifically oriented to the critique of modernity prevalent among subsequent Traditionalism or Perennialism.

¹⁰ Marcia Hermansen, “Literary Productions”, Kate Zebiri, “The Relationship between Seeker and Spiritual Guide as portrayed in contemporary Western Sufi Autobiographies” British scholar Kate Zebiri followed this with an article that focussed on depictions of the seeker’s relationship to the spiritual guide in several contemporary Western Sufi autobiographies, specifically those of Reshad Feild, Muhyiuddin Shakoor, and Maryam Kabeer Faye.

¹¹ On Sufi movements in America see Marcia K. Hermansen, “In the Garden of American Sufi movements: Hybrids and Perennials” in *New Trends and Developments in the World of Islam*, ed. Peter Clarke, (London: Luzac Oriental Press, 1996), 149-172.

¹² Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

In terms of the history of Sufism in the United States, the Immigration Reform Act of 1965 opened the door to an influx of much larger numbers of immigrants from Muslim societies, which gradually began to affect the presence and character of Sufi activities in America. Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s what I have termed “hybrid” Sufism was brought by visiting and immigrant Sufi leaders trained in the Muslim world. Prominent among such more Islamically-oriented orders were the Helveti-Jerrahis led by Shaykh Mozaffer Ozak (d. 1985) from Istanbul and the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis led by Cypriot Shaykh Nazim (d. 2014) and his Lebanese son-in-law, Shaykh Hisham Kabbani.

The core of each of these Sufi movements was Islamic, although individual members and even sub-branches continued to maintain eclectic or New Age beliefs and practices. During the 1980s and 1990s, these were the most vibrant and expanding Sufi groups in the US, along with the Philadelphia-based followers of Sinhalese Guru Bawa (d. 1984), whose followers likewise include and continue to attract both shari’a-oriented and mystically eclectic elements.¹³

With the turn of the 21st century, the growth edge of Sufism in America was driven by new demographics. The spiritual seekers of the 1960s were graying and the numbers of eclectic, New Age Sufis dwindling. At the same time immigration from the Muslim world continued to increase such that most immigrant Muslims currently in the US have arrived since 1980.¹⁴ Many children of the earlier immigrant waves began to take an interest in “authentic” Islam, as opposed to “movement” or political Islam. For this new audience Sufi teachers who could speak in an American idiom while presenting Islamic credentials had a great appeal. Within the context of the distaste for Sufism among the leadership of national Muslim organizations such as ISNA (Islamic Society of North America), specific Sufi *tariqa* allegiance was downplayed in favor of a broader Islamic spiritual cultivation stressing concepts such as *ihsan* (righteousness) or

¹³ The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship has been studied more extensively and ethnographically than most American Sufi movements. For example by Gisela Webb, “Third -Wave Sufism in America and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship,” In *Sufism in the West*, edited by Jamal Malik and John Hinnells, 86-102. London: Routledge, 2006 and Frank Korom, “Charisma and Community: A Brief History of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship,” *The Sri Lankan Journal of the Humanities* 37, nos. 1-2 (2011): 19-33.

¹⁴ “Fully one-quarter of all U.S. Muslim adults (25%) have arrived in this country since 2000. . .” “Most of the foreign-born Muslims came to the United States after 2000 (40%) or during the 1990s (31%). An additional 16% arrived in the 1980s. Just 12% arrived before 1980.” Pew Research Center <http://www.people-press.org/2011/08/30/section-1-a-demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans/> Retrieved September 5, 2016.

purification of the *nafs* (soul). Notable in this regard is American convert Hamza Yusuf Hanson (b. 1958) who presented traditional Islamic knowledge and learning as a characteristic of authentic Muslim identity. This “authenticity” Sufism appealed to mainstream American Muslims as well as those more Sufi-inclined individuals who yearned for “authentic” Islamic spirituality. Overall, since the 1990s the character of Sufism in the United States became more formally “Islamic” with the greater number of younger affiliates being involved with shari’a-oriented tariqas. A “bridge” generation of Sufi converts who formulated an intellectually cogent and culturally appealing and sophisticated presentation of Sufism has been instrumental in this transition.

The shift from tariqa-based Sufism to what may be characterized as global “traditional Islam” has enabled conceptual and cooperative connections to be built and maintained across diverse scholars and Islamic institutions that espouse similar views and increasingly face Islamist and literalist opposition.¹⁵ In the West figures associated with this include already mentioned American Hamza Yusuf Hanson and Yemeni Shaykh Habib al-Jifri. The idea of “traditional” Islam has been identified as a return to the Ahl al-sunna wa-l jama’a (people of the Sunna and the community—Sunni) consensus of the four schools (madhhabs) in Islamic jurisprudence, Sunni ‘Asharite theology, and *tasawwuf* (Sufism) of the sober variety.¹⁶ Among the more recent cohorts of Sufis in the West we may further observe a tendency toward punctilious observation of norms and immersion in the discourse of “fiqh”—to the extent that the neologisms “fiqhsation” and “authenti‘fiqh’ation” may describe this orientation.

In the works to be considered here we see elements of this shifting background to Western Sufi movements.

Four Examples of Post-Millennial Western Sufi Autobiography

In this study I will consider four examples of Western Sufi autobiography written since 2000: Michael Sugich, *Signs on the Horizons, Meetings with Men of Knowledge and Illumination* (2013); Nuh Ha Mim Keller, *Sea without Shore: a Manual of the Sufi Path* (2011);

¹⁵ Ronald Geaves, “Transformations and Trends Among British Sufis” in *Sufism in Britain*, ed. Ron Geaves and Theodore Gabriel. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, 47-51.

¹⁶ Ira M. Lapidus, “Islamic Revival and Modernity: The Contemporary Movements and the Historical Paradigms” in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 40 (4, 1997) 444-460.

Maryam Kabeer Faye, *Journey through Ten Thousand Veils: The Alchemy of Transformation on the Sufi Path* (2008); and Rabia Christine Brodbeck, *From the Stage to the Prayer Mat*. (2008).

Each of these selections is situated within “Islamic” Sufism. Three of the authors are Westerners who are permanently located in the Muslim World—Nuh Ha Mim Keller in Jordan, Michael Sugich in Dubai, and Rabia Brodbeck in Turkey. All are well traveled and cosmopolitan, even privileged, in background. Each author married a spouse from the traditional Muslim world, although these unions seem to have been more challenging in the case of the female Sufis.

The two male authors are fluent in Arabic and conversant with classical works in the Islamic and Sufi literary tradition in that language. The female authors have not formally studied Islam to the same degree and do not know Arabic well or have such extensive experience in the Arab world. Rabia Brodbeck is embedded in Turkish culture, however, and lives in Istanbul. In the examples that I have chosen for this paper—and any choice is of course subjective and can only point out certain trends to the neglect of others—I am able to focus on this more recent growth edge which I termed above “authenticity” or “traditional Islam” Sufism. At the same time traces of earlier phases in Western Sufism are evident, for example in Kabeer Faye who encounters both universalist and hybrid forms, and Sugich and Brodbeck who are directly involved in some forms of hybrid Sufi Orders.

Michael Sugich, *Signs on the Horizons Meetings with Men of Knowledge and Illumination*

Sugich begins by introducing his “book of memories” containing accounts of his meetings with “remarkable men”.¹⁷ This is, of course, a direct allusion to Gurdjieff’s classic work that I claim has been an inspiration to many subsequent Western Sufi narratives.

To set a context for Sugich and his book, let me cite from an interview with the author:

Michael Sugich, known as Ustaz Haroon, is an American writer who found his way to Islam 40 years ago, and lived for 23 years in the sacred city of Mecca in close company to people of virtue and piety. His book, as he explains, is a book of memories. It is a series of wonderful and breathtaking accounts of individuals whom he came in contact with and considers extraordinarily pious Muslims. They are examples and signs for us, to be guided by and follow.

In response to the interviewer’s question, “What motivated you to write it?” Sugich responds:

¹⁷ Michael Sugich, *Signs*, 9.

Muslims have lost their moral and spiritual compass in our time. In traditional Muslim societies the gnostic saints were that compass. They were the exemplars and reference points for ordinary Muslims. They were illuminated and embodied beautiful character and spiritual courtesy. Since the late 19th century this spirituality has been sidelined and the saints have been dismissed and denigrated. One of the great tragedies in the intellectual life of Islam in our time is the almost complete removal of the sciences of Tassawwuf (purification of the ego) from the public discourse and the loss of awareness of these people. Young Muslims have been cut adrift from this deep spiritual anchor to their faith. I wanted to let them know that these people still exist and they are real, that illumination is a possibility, that the path to God is real and that it is for everyone. I have been gifted with proximity to these people. I wanted to share my experiences on the way to provide a glimmer of hope to sincere seekers.¹⁸

Sugich's text is not a typical autobiographical narration structured according to a plot of birth, youth, maturity, etc. but rather is composed of anecdotes about saintly beings that Sugich met on his journeys within Sufism. In the course of the telling we do learn certain interesting facts about the author, for example, that he was adopted, may be of Syrian origin, married a Saudi woman in California, lived in Saudi Arabia for many years, and has worked as a travel writer and guide. In the preface to *Signs on the Horizons* Sugich explains his approach to writing the memoir. He specifically alludes to the tradition of hagiography in classical Islamic literature, mentioning Sufi authors al-Tirmidhi (869), Abu Nu'aym al-Isfahani (1038), Fariduddin Attar (1220), and the *Ruh al-Quds* of Ibn Arabi (1240) as exemplars of what he terms "anecdotal hagiographies."¹⁹

One motive he cites for composing the memoir is to refresh and reserve his recollections of these presences "when my sense of need has been strongest these men have appeared in my life like divine instruments."²⁰ In addition, the volume is a "personal celebration" of the process of discipleship under spiritual masters.²¹ It seems that this author struggled with the process of writing the memoir. He hesitated during his time in Saudi Arabia where the practice of Sufism was banned and also out of a reluctance to exhibit pride or hubris, especially since many others

¹⁸ Mozynah Nofal, "Conversations with Saintly People: An Interview with Michael Sugich" *Muslim Link* May 30, 2015 <http://muslimlink.ca/faith/portraits-of-faith/interview-with-sugich> Retrieved March 6, 2016.

¹⁹ Sugich, 12.

²⁰ Sugich, 10.

²¹ Sugich, 11.

have had “more profound and more prolonged contact” with these great beings.²² The “signs on the horizon”²³ are those individuals who live in the realm of meaning. Sugich opines: “We have lost that meaning. We are living in an age that overwhelmingly revels in the world, alternating between euphoria and anxiety. We are oblivious to the subtle blessings and hidden realities that permeate existence”.²⁴ Thus flight from this disenchanted and worldly condition and nostalgia for spiritual encounters are themes of his memoir.

Sugich’s trajectory through Western Sufism is not laid out in detail and some elements may have been deliberately avoided or simply omitted as not being salient to the purposes of the memoir. The names of various American Sufi pioneers are mentioned, likely known to scholars of Western Sufism and Sufis themselves including: Shams Friedlander, Abdallah Schleifer, Peter Sanders, Abd al-Hayy Moore, Charles Le Gai Eaton, Farid and Aisha Gouverneur. Among this cohort ex-Murabitun²⁵ and Schuonian²⁶ Sufis figure most prominently. Due to the references to the Darqawiyya Order, Moroccan elements, and the companionship of noted photographer Peter Sanders.²⁷ I ascertain that Sugich likely began his Sufi career with Abd al-Qadir as-Sufi (Ian Dallas) and like many of the talented early disciples of the Murabitun, then moved on towards “traditional Islam”.

The memoirs that comprise the work’s anecdotes draw on persons that Sugich met during the course of being on the Sufi path. Most accounts are set in Morocco but some others take place in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Some individuals are named, some fleetingly and anonymously encountered in mosques and other public spaces. It is both about these individuals and about the reality that they embody and confirm. These personages may be teachers, facilitators, or simply confirmers of his spiritual state.

The format is that Sugich relates across six sections in each of 40 brief chapters, a story or anecdote of an experience or encounter that he had with a remarkable being, concluding with an aphorism or a quotation from a Sufi classic. Yet most of these individuals appear to be quite

²² Sugich, 11.

²³ A reference to Qur’an 14:53 “We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and in themselves, till it is clear to them that it is the truth.”

²⁴ Sugich, 11.

²⁵ The Murabitun is the name of the Sufi Order established by ‘Abdal Qadir as-Sufi.

²⁶ That is “traditionalist” Sufis associated with the Maryamiyya Order following Frithjof Schuon. Both Abd al-Qadir and Schuon are Western shaykhs of Sufi Orders.

²⁷ <http://petersanders.com> Accessed Sept. 10, 2016.

ordinary on the surface and the hints of a higher or deeper reality are in the nature of synchronistic meetings and connections as well as irruptions of the usual time space continuum. One example has Sugich inwardly thinking while visiting Mecca that he would like to send someone on a trip to Medina, the Prophet's city, as a meritorious action. Initially when a beggar asks him for funds he recoils, only to hear the person say, "I thought you wanted to send someone to Medina".²⁸

The anecdotal form is also a space for intertextuality as the brief anecdotes conclude with apposite aphorisms, for example, citations from the Shadhili Sufi classic, the *Hikam* of al-Iskandari, poems of Fariduddin Attar, or verses from the Qur'an. Thus in Sugich's work we find the deliberate imitation of the genre of classical Sufi "aphoristic" biographical writing, a hagiography of sorts —with allusions to Sufi interpretations but also images or references that might resonate with a contemporary Western readership. Along the way Sugich is a humble guide, exposing his own naiveté and foibles.

In summary, we may consider this work as exemplifying the new sense of time and space posited by Foucault, a new space that yet is not entirely alien to the classical Islamic Sufi worldview where expectations of linearity are overwhelmed by deeper or more transcendent connections and meanings.

Nuh Ha Mim Keller: *A Sea without Shore: A Manual of the Sufi Path*

Shaykh Nuh Ha Mim Keller (b. ca 1954)²⁹ is an American-born Shadhili shaykh in the line of the Shadhiliyya 'Alawiyya. After briefly studying at the University of Chicago, Keller became a long time resident of Amman, Jordan in the 1980s. He visits the United States twice a year, where he has a number of American disciples who are mainly young Muslims born of immigrant parents and raised in the West who are seeking a return to Islamic authenticity.

Keller is a direct disciple of 'Abd al-Rahman al-Shaghuri (d. 2004)³⁰ a Damascene Shadhili Shaykh in the line of both Shaykh Muhammad Sa'id Kurdi³¹ and Shaykh Hashimi (d.

²⁸ Sugich, 54.

²⁹ Al-Kurdī, *Aurād al-ṭarīqa al-Shadhiliyya* (Amman, 1997)

³⁰ 'Abd al-Raḥmān Saghūrī, *Diwān al-ḥadā'iq al-nādiyya fī-al-nasamāt al-rūḥiyya* (Damascus: Dār fajr al-urūba, 1998).

1961) (a disciple of Shaykh al-‘Alawī).³² al-Kurdi was born in Jordan and studied the traditional Islamic sciences in Damascus.³³ He lived in the Jordanian village of Sarih, near Irbid, where he died in 1972 at the age of 82. Al-Kurdi was a sober Sufi and a Shafi‘i Ashar‘i, who established mosques and emphasized strict observance of the Sunna, to the extent that women followers often wear face veils and gloves. This is also encouraged among those who follow Keller.

Shaykh al-Shaghuri, al-Kurdi’s disciple, was born in Homs in 1912 and was a descendant of the Prophet. He moved to Damascus in 1922 where he studied Islamic sciences and received his Shadhili *ijaza* from Muhammad Hashimi, Sa‘id al-Kurdi and others. He followed the branch of the Shadhili Sufi Order called al-Shadhiliyya al-Darqawiyya al-Hashimiyya,³⁴ and his tariqa performed its ceremony of remembrance (hadra) in the Nuriyya mosque of Damascus.

Keller is an example of the first generation of Western Sufis who have studied Islamic and Arabic sources extensively and have their own followings who are strongly observant of shari‘a norms. His approach to Sufism has been characterized as “techno-fiqh” by some other American Sufis. On the other hand, his followers perceive his style as being the most orthodox.³⁵ His young American followers characterize themselves as “a generation of Muslims who have a sophisticated awareness of their religion coupled with an awareness of the need for sacred knowledge and an acceptance of Sufism as a *shari’a* discipline necessary for purification of the heart.”³⁶ His Internet conversion story is a popular example of the genre and his published works to date are translations of classical Shafi‘i legal manuals, such as the *Maqasid* of al-Nawawi and the biographical manual covered in this chapter, *Sea without Shore*.³⁷

Keller’s book opens with chapters that are biographical notices of Sufis he met in Syria, Jordan and Turkey. It is billed as “a practical *manual* for those travelling on the path of Sufism

³¹ Muḥammad Najjāḥ al-Naubān, *Al-‘arīf b-illāh Muhammad Sa‘īd Kurdī* (Amman: Dār al-Manāhij, 1997).

³² Shaykh al-‘Alawī (d. 1934) was an Algerian Shadhili master whose influence on contemporary and especially Western Sufi movements is very significant.

³³ al-Kurdī, *Dauha al-amdād fī dhikr ba‘d al-awliyā’ al-akrād* (Irbid, n.d.), 1.

³⁴ al-Saghūrī, *Diwān*, 2.

³⁵ Boumediene Hamzi, “Notes on the history of orthodox Sufism in the United States,” unpublished paper.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ *Reliance of the Traveler* (Evanston: Sunna Books, 1993) and al-Nawawī, *Maqasid* (Evanston: Sunna Books, 1994).

or Islamic mysticism”.³⁸ The first third of the biographical section (about 123 pages) are narratives of Sufis that he encountered. The second is a handbook of the method and rule of the Shadhiliyya Sufi Order, the last third deals with discussions of theological questions such as Islamic perspectives on other faiths and mysticisms, universalism, evolution, and human suffering.

For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on the first one-third of the volume, which is implicitly, but not explicitly, autobiographical. While Keller’s earlier brief narrative of his conversion³⁹ is much more in the genre of an intellectual account of what drew him to Islam, this work combines anecdotes of influential Sufis on his process and progress, which serve as a preface to the manual component of the book. In Keller’s own words in the preface: “The first describes men I met and knew in the path. All were fonts of guidance whom God had blessed with his greatest gift: experiencing the incomparable Oneness of the Divine. I begin with them lest such men be thought to no longer exist.”⁴⁰

Part One entitled “Men of the Path” opens with a biography of Saghuri, who put others ahead of himself, “He never drew attention to spiritual powers or himself but always to Allah and to the Sunna of his messenger”.⁴¹ In fact the opening scene occurs in 2004 at the funeral of Shaykh Saghuri in Damascus. According to Keller this shaykh stressed learning the traditional sciences, and would not permit a disciple’s ignorance of *fiqh* (religious practice) or *‘aqida* (tenets of faith). Thus we see the shari’a orientation and grounding in traditional Islam. Keller reflects on the Shaykh’s humble way of teaching, not promoting himself or his own knowledge. Early on Keller takes the opportunity to criticize Henri Corbin and the Perennialists through recounting how the Shaykh rejected the “esoteric” Sufi doctrines that Keller had previously gleaned from English sources. “Once I asked the Shaykh about the transcendent unity of religions and he replied ‘audhu billah’ (we take refuge with Allah [from the accursed Satan])”.⁴²

Keller recounts Shaykh ‘Abd al-Rahman’s knowledge of Sufism as well as his inclination to *wahdat al-wujūd*, the doctrine of Ibn al-‘Arabi. In fact, the Shaykh gave regular lessons from

³⁸ Nuh Ha Mim Keller, *Sea without Shore: A Manual of the Sufi Path*, (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 2011), book jacket.

³⁹ “Becoming Muslim”. <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/nuh/bmuslim.htm> Accessed Oct. 15, 2016 also Amman: Wakeel Books, 2001.

⁴⁰ Nuh Ha Mim Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, vii.

⁴¹ Keller, 5.

⁴² Keller, 6.

al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya.⁴³ He does describe the life story of al-Saghuri, the character of the Shaykh, his teaching, some of the moments he spent with him and the advice he received according to the Shadhili way. In making a distinction between early Sufism and Shadhilis, Keller explains how the early Sufis would mortify the soul with sleeplessness, deprivation, etc. The way of Abu'l al-Hasan as-Shadhili was instead a way of gratitude to the divine, humbly striving to please Allah for the sake of Allah.⁴⁴ Keller provides a fairly extensive description of the Shaykh's method of teaching "through sessions of singing and expounding poetry at people's homes, public lectures from classic works, and private meetings with students who had taken his hand".⁴⁵ It is the most academic of the autobiographies but also follows the Islamic scholarly tradition of citing what he had heard the Shaykh teach from: al-Jilani's *Futuh al-ghayb*, al-Sarraj al-Tusi's *al-Luma'*, Ibn 'Arabi's *Futuhāt*, Muhammad al-Buzaydi's *al-Adab al-mardiyya*, Ibn 'Ajiba's *al-Mubāhith al-asliyya*, Abul Mawahib al-Tunisi's *Qawanin hikam al-ishraq*, al-Suhrawardi's *'Awarif al-Ma'arif*, al-Sha'rani's *al-Yawaqit wa al-jawahir* and *Lata'if al-minan*, Mustafa Naja's *Sharh al-wadhiha*, and other works.⁴⁶ He interspersed his commentaries with verses from mystical poetry.

Keller's account is autobiographical in various ways. He describes how initially he needed lessons taped as his level of Arabic required several exposures to grasp the entire meaning. He also describes his coming closer to the Shaykh over the years and through his increasing practice of the Sufi path. Subsequent chapters of the book involve Keller's involvement with other Sufi individuals whom he characterizes as: the Faqih, the neighborhood Imam, the friend, and the last Ottoman.

The second chapter is a tribute to a humble scholar of fiqh who was also a powerful influence on Keller during his years of visiting Damascus, 'Abd al-Wakil. Keller describes this individual's comportment and self-effacing ways as well as his punctilious observation of fiqh and his depth in Islamic learning. The account reflects some elements of classical scholarly biography in Islam by enumerating some of the books he studied in fiqh, hadith, and Sufism including Ibn Ajiba, al-Ghazzali, al-Suhrawardi (*Awarif*). He assists Keller in rendering the Shafi'ite work of Islamic, *Reliance of the Traveller*, Keller's first and major publication.

⁴³ Keller, 7.

⁴⁴ Keller, 17-18.

⁴⁵ Keller, 21.

⁴⁶ Keller, 21.

The third chapter entitled “the Neighborhood Imam” concerns Keller’s experience of Jordanian Shaykh Yunus, a disciple of Shaykh al-Kurdi. Yunus is described as living simple life, helped Keller with translation—rejects being the head of the tariqa in Jordan. He was Imam of a district in Amman called Kharabsheh which later became a center of those attracted to Shaykh Nuh Keller’s ’s tariqa. He seemed to instinctively recite things during the prayer which were on the mind of Keller. Keller moved to follow the Shaykh to a remote area where Keller lived in a tiny shack for about a year in order to be near Yunus and benefit from his company. Shaykh Yunus avoided fame and those who wanted to make him into a spiritual leader. The chapter focuses on his deep immersion in *dhikr*, the Sufi practice of remembering the divine.

The fourth chapter, “The Friend” concerns Shaykh Adel, another Jordanian contact and disciple of Shaykh Kurdi, who had passed away in 1972. While describing the character and nature of this individual, the chapter is also about spiritual experience, levels of realization, and the Sufi path in general. An interesting passage, apposite to our theme is Keller’s reflection on the difference between Western and Eastern Sufi aspirants:

In later years I would notice that intellectual pride was perhaps the commonest reason that Western seekers stumble from the path. If Easterners are tempted by worldliness and mammon, Westerners’ temptation is through ideas, rejecting established points of the religion of Islam out of pride in their own opinions, airs of cultural superiority, or a sense of self-consequence. Whether they know more than the ulema and sheikhs concerning an agreed-upon interpretation of a Koranic verse, an article of faith, or a point of external practice, intellectual pride is a serpent, and its strike can be fatal to one’s *suluk* or spiritual progress.⁴⁷

The chapter is full of reflections on the state of Shaykh Adel, his love for his *murshid*, al-Kurdi, his realization, profundity in *dhikr*, and noble character. These descriptions, as in other chapters, are often punctuated by citations from classical Sufi texts, both Shadhili and other, that reflect the points being made about the path and those who follow it

The final biographical chapter on “The Last Ottoman” features a Naqshbandi shaykh in Istanbul who was the spiritual guide of the woman that Keller eventually marries. He therefore

⁴⁷ Keller, 80.

came to know this Shaykh initially as a prospective suitor and then through occasional contacts over the next decade when he and his spouse would visit the shaykh once or twice annually in Istanbul. The description of the shaykh who comes from the Naqshbandi tariqa, includes his approach to training disciples, his own very extensive religious practice, as well as astute observations on how the shaykh's methods impacted those who were following the Sufi path under his guidance.

The manual component of the book is directed primarily to those who are disciples of Keller. It is reminiscent of classical Sufi works in that it incorporates quotes and practices from earlier Sufi sources, especially from masters of the Shadhili Sufi order. At the same time it contains elements that are very specific to the current epoch and to the situation of disciples who may have come from Western, previously non-Muslim, backgrounds. It is the most extensive of the works studied in this chapter in terms of the specificity and detail of the manual for Sufi attitudes and behaviors and assumes the perspective of Westerners who are immersing themselves in Sufism and who can benefit from Keller's own experience of this process. It details a strict process of affiliating to and practicing one of the four schools (madhabs) of Sunni law, in particular with regard to gender segregation and maintaining traditional roles of males and females within family and society. The book also features a glossary of Islamic and Sufi concepts.

Rabia Christine Brodbeck, *From the Stage to the Prayer Mat: The Story of How a World-Famous Dancer Fell in Love with the Divine* (2008)

Rabia Brodbeck is originally from Switzerland but during her cosmopolitan career as a modern dancer she spent extensive time in New York City where in the 1980s she encountered followers of the Helveti Jerrahi Shaykh, Mozaffer Ozak. In a preface Brodbeck presents her book as emerging as a result of inspiration, and she invokes Sufi saints such as 'Abd al-Qadir Jilani, Ibn 'Arabi, and Rumi as part of this process. Early on in the text she established that, "I did not travel from the West to the East; rather, I came from my unawareness and encountered the reality of my own being. I did not change my belief; instead, I came from a misguided, meaningless life,

to a life of eternal richness.”⁴⁸ Here we see her eschewing binary constructions of “East” vs. “West” suggesting the emergence of a new globalized understanding of space. Aside from her experiences in dance, Brodbeck does not tell us much about her personal life before Sufism other than sketching a broad context of her participation in creative and dance circles and her own lack of interest in spirituality and religion. Although she and her circle of artistic and intellectual friends were against consumerism and excessive attention to materialism, they never talked about religion.

In fact, this book begins with its “manual” component preceding the autobiographical chapters starting with a chapter called “wonder and admiration for Prophet Muhammad”. Thus the core of Brodbeck’s presentation of Islam is devotion and her discussion of the basics of Islam is highly influenced by Sufi concepts. She places much emphasis on the Islamic sacred law performed with devotion asserting that, “Islam demonstrates that the worth and honor of a human being does not lie in the perfection of knowledge, rather in the degree of love he shows to submit to God’s commandments and the degree of his struggle to achieve the highest ethics of character traits”.⁴⁹ Indeed, “The ritual prayer, fasting, charity, service to the needy, the pilgrimage, are all designed to exercise our sensitivity of the unseen worlds. Our modern societies lost the connection to the divine realms of the hereafter”.⁵⁰

Brodbeck only begins the autobiographical part, her life story, called “The Dance of Life” on page 89 of a book of some 300 pages. In the brief account of her life before Sufism Brodbeck paints the picture of a young woman who did not have a strong religious formation. She observes that there are two kinds of young people—those who prefer to continue on like everyone else or those who question everything. Being one of the latter, she felt a sense of felt narrowness, that life was insufficient and this, Brodbeck explains, is how she was drawn to big cities in order to learn.⁵¹ By chance some of her American friends in New York City stumble on a Helveti circle and she joins them, is profoundly affected and begins to attend.⁵² After two years she years goes to Istanbul to meet the leader of the *tariqa*, Mozaffer Ozak Efendi. She

⁴⁸ Rabia Christine Brodbeck, *From the Stage to the Prayer Mat: The Story of How a World-Famous Dancer Fell in Love with the Divine*. (Clifton, NJ: Tughra Books, 2008), x. Part One, entitled “Wonder and admiration for Prophet Muhammad.”

⁴⁹ Brodbeck, 61.

⁵⁰ Brodbeck, 67.

⁵¹ Brodbeck, 90-91.

⁵² Brodbeck, 95

subsequently permanently relocates to Istanbul, gets married to a Turk, and has a child, although the marriage ultimately does not last.

In her chapter entitled “Conversion” Brodbeck cites a poem that she composed:

I did not convert
 I simply discovered the hidden treasures inside of me,
 I did not change my belief;
 I came from a misguided, meaningless life to a life of eternal richness.
 I did not travel from the west to the east;
 I came only from my own unawareness
 And encountered the reality of my own being.⁵³

This reprises her earlier theme that inner journeying is ultimately beyond physical locomotion or situation whether in East or West.

The next autobiographical chapter concerns living in Turkey. Brodbeck opines that the “East should learn from west and vice versa”. Despite the challenges of leaving behind the high standard of living in Switzerland, she declares that, “Turkey became a paradise for me while Switzerland makes me feel restricted empty and low”.⁵⁴ However, she laments that, “modern Turkish life is becoming unbalanced”.

Like me, many people in the West have become overwhelmed by materialism and capitalism. We begin to feel great discomfort and went in search for some spiritual realities, which were only available in the East. Of course, this was only a minor movement and still is a small percentage of people who opened up to the East.⁵⁵

Among the missing qualities that have disappeared from the West with modernity Brodbeck enumerates: submission, stillness, contemplation, secrecy, concealment, surrender,

⁵³ Brodbeck, 116.

⁵⁴ Brodbeck, 108

⁵⁵ Brodbeck, 109.

respect, receptivity, and especially—silence.⁵⁶ She continues that, “Only in the East can we find specialists for the complexity of the soul, the heart, the mind, and the psyche, because these specialists of the soul are all connected to the law of the religion”.⁵⁷ Her conclusions tend towards universalism, for example: “There is just one God, truth, one religion, and one message... At the origins of human existence, there are no Jews, Muslims, Christians, or Buddhists. There is no east-west, time-place, ancient-new. When spiritual experience becomes grounded, we are dealing with eternal values.”⁵⁸ Thus Brodbeck embodies a new sense of transcending space.

In a later chapter on “when knowledge becomes love” Brodbeck repeatedly makes the point that religion is more than morality or following rules, or even knowledge—it is perfection in love. The search for the true self is the greater jihad and we must “know ourselves”, and “die before we die”—all sayings of the Prophet Muhammad deeply meaningful to Sufis.

The final section of the book, part four, consists of two apocalyptic chapters. In the first, “Humanity between Salvation and Destruction” Brodbeck describes searching for a language for the end of times when humanity will be faced with tragedies and natural disasters. These will arise due to the loss of nature’s balance—evidence for this impending chaos that she cites includes: the war on terror, mass media, financial market collapse, danger of nuclear war, rise in mental illness, rape of nature, overpopulation, refugees, global warming. In discussing pervasive moral degeneration and materialism, she quotes Said Nursi and Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s observations along the lines that the tragedy of modern man is living without god.⁵⁹ Before encountering actual Sufis, Brodbeck mentions reading a book on Sufism by Martin Lings, and she quotes Frithjof Schuon, demonstrating her familiarity with diverse currents in contemporary Sufism, inclining toward Perennialism, before she becomes a member of a hybrid order.

Further evidence of deterioration in our era is general desacralization and the loss of shame.⁶⁰ According to Brodbeck, we live in a spiritual desert full of destructive forces, provoking a globalization of problems: “The time has arrived when the eastern reality meets the

⁵⁶ Brodbeck, 110.

⁵⁷ Brodbeck, 113-4.

⁵⁸ Brodbeck, 114.

⁵⁹ Brodbeck, 263.

⁶⁰ Brodbeck, 268.

western reality. East and West have become inseparable”.⁶¹ She becomes somewhat political as well in criticizing American foreign policy—stating that the irony of our times is that the United States presents itself as a model of justice. “But, in reality, it terrorizes the whole world and threatens to attack any other nations who does not support their corrupt ideology and their false fight against terrorism. Their policy is this: if you are not with us, then you are against us.”⁶² She describes Islam today as the target of corrupt systems, “it is not about oil but jealousy of the perfected religion.”⁶³ Clearly invoking the “War of Terror” of the Bush II era, Brodbeck sees Sept 11th as a pivotal moment but she is not entirely pessimistic about an inevitable clash of East and West asserting that: “This is the time for interactive dialogue, global solutions, eternal values—lets us leave black and white, halal/haram thinking—modern man has to wake up from unconsciousness and encounter the divine reality of his being.”⁶⁴

Her final chapter is an optimistic meditation on the potential contributions of East and West is an era of global meeting. She is somewhat binary in characterizing the heritage of the West as analysis and that of the East as “illumination”.⁶⁵ Like many others she sees modern physics and its principles as compatible with and anticipated by the realizations of the ancient mystics which she terms the laws of perfect order. She imagines a meeting of logic and transcendence, material and spiritual, body and soul. Ultimately, she sees East and West as complementary and able to benefit from one another. ⁶⁶ “To conclude, today we can observe like never before I human history, a great need for the universality of the truth! In old times, East and West had a separate existence. Now, we are forced through the current global events to get together and find answers, solutions, and salvation on a wide scale.” There should be no exclusivity, there should be meeting as “everything belongs to everyone. But the ultimate wisdom is this: nothing belongs to the human being, not even to his own self!”⁶⁷ At the same time, Islam is her path and she claims that as a result of “awareness of the universal religion, Islam is experiencing revival due to the present fusion of eastern and western knowledge.”⁶⁸

⁶¹ Brodbeck, 270.

⁶² Brodbeck, 272.

⁶³ Brodbeck, 273.

⁶⁴ Brodbeck, 278.

⁶⁵ Brodbeck, 290.

⁶⁶ Brodbeck, 292.

⁶⁷ Brodbeck, 303.

⁶⁸ Brodbeck, 304.

Brodbeck goes on to assert how Islam is the universal religion since the Prophet Muhammad was sent to all of humanity and Islam contains the essence of all religions.

Similar to Sugich and Kabeer Faye, Brodbeck looks for contemporary living exemplars of spiritual truth and enlightenment, finding few. “God had taken away the majority of His illuminated saints.”⁶⁹ This, in turn has led to a loss of the light of unity that was diffused by these perfected beings and while humans face each other through globalization, they discover that they are dangerously distant. This manifests in symptoms of political and ecological crisis, the roots of which are ultimately spiritual. But this is ultimately God’s training and teaching of humanity since “the greatest teacher of our time is pain.”⁷⁰ Her solution is the awareness that Islam teaches that the whole of humanity, the world’s population, has to be like one body. . . This is universal consciousness.”⁷¹

In her final pages, Brodbeck calls in devotion for illumination through the “truth of Muhammad” since in Sufi terms “it is through his reality that we exist.”⁷² In concluding the book she states, “Now is the time for the good news that we are not bound to time and place. Now we have to give our souls the visa for immigration, to set ourselves free on a magnificent journey to our homeland. Now is the time to realize that our loss is our gain. Now is the time to realize that the faithful believer is the mirror of the faithful believer.”⁷³ It is with these phrases that she wraps up her long exposition in terms that resonate with traditional tropes of mystical journeying and self-effacement, and at the same time have a post-modern ring that intersect in surprising ways with Foucault’s theory of hypertopic spatiality communicated through metaphors of the mirror, liminal spaces, and journeying.

Maryam Kabeer Faye *Journey through Ten Thousand Veils: The Alchemy of Transformation on the Sufi Path* (2009)

As the final work that I will consider in this chapter, this book is the most explicitly autobiographical and follows the course of a chronological travelogue that is the most global of

⁶⁹ Brodbeck, 281.

⁷⁰ Brodbeck, 281-2.

⁷¹ Brodbeck, 284.

⁷² Brodbeck, 315.

⁷³ Brodbeck, 316.

the accounts considered here. Maryam Kabeer Faye's spiritual search begins early in her life and she has the most sustained encounter with religions other than Islam. Her preface begins with Qur'anic verse (5:18) "unto Him is the journeying"—then a very interesting poem by Kabeer Faye herself entitled the "Road to the Beloved" that includes the following lines.

I was guided in my journey
 To see and love deeply
 Lands and people of great beauty
 That no longer exist,
 Lands and people that can never be found again
 In this world,
 But are alive in my heart.
 They are alive within me,
 And it is my loving duty
 To bear witness
 To their life and legacy.⁷⁴

Note the lines in the poem that convey ideas such as her seeing "countries before they were destroyed" and meeting "the ancient ones before they left this world". This reminds me of the mood of nostalgia in other works considered here in particular, Sugich, for a vanishing enchanted world of spirituality. Kabeer Faye depicts herself as "putting a puzzle together" through her life journey, a theme that is reprised near the conclusion in the image of the stained glass window whose elements she has been gathering and is now assembling.⁷⁵

The spiritual messages in the opening poem are eclectic, reflecting Kabeer Faye's movements from a family coming from liberal Judaism to Eastern religions in Berkeley of the 1960s, to Christian monasticism, several American Sufi movements, and finally to Islam. For example, the poem exhorts that we: "We must let go of false concepts"⁷⁶ and lift the "veils of karmic bondage" clearly drawing on Hindu or Buddhist concepts that are part of a broader New Age spirituality.⁷⁷ Later Kabeer Faye states that we live in a time of destruction comparable to the "Kali Yoga".⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Brodbeck, vi.

⁷⁵ Maryam Kabeer Faye, *Journey through Ten Thousand Veils: The Alchemy of Transformation on the Sufi Path* (Somerset, NJ: Tughra Books, 2008), vii, 289.

⁷⁶ Kabeer Faye, ix.

⁷⁷ Kabeer Faye, viii

⁷⁸ Kabeer Faye, 22.

Her life account starts in a liberal Jewish family in Hollywood. Her parents divorced when she was seven years old and her mother withdrew into fascination with a new spouse. Kabeer Faye's life is very situated in America in the 1950s and 60s as she mentions the civil rights struggle of Martin Luther King, art, theatre, the impact of the assassination of President Kennedy, etc. She attends Berkeley University and meets Daniel Moore⁷⁹ where both creative individuals live in a community surrounded by experimental theatre and explorations in Eastern religions.

Her first attraction, as for most spiritual seekers of the time, was to India. Kabeer Faye departs on a quest in India to find the Guru of Baba Ram Das (Richard Alpert), Neem Karoli Baba. On her way she describes traversing the Afghanistan of Rumi.⁸⁰ Her introduction to Islam comes through the prayer break taken by Afghan bus passengers⁸¹ and this is understood as being among various signs that she should become Muslim. Periodic trials encountered by Kabeer Faye include illness, lack of resources, threat of assault, etc.

Her return to the US involves her with the group of eclectic seekers who are establishing the Lama Foundation in New Mexico including Noorudeen Durkee, another well-known convert to Sufi Islam.⁸² At this point many in the group are being gradually drawn to more shari'a oriented Islam and find a Shadhili Shaykh Jamal ar Rifa'i⁸³ while living on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.

Kabeer Faye's encounters along the way usually involve her being recognized and instructed by sages and practitioners of various spiritual paths. In Israel/Palestine her destiny within Islam is confirmed as she spends time with an elderly Sufi in Hebron whom she affectionately calls "the grandfather", who tells her to commence performing the Muslim ritual prayers. In explaining why Islam became her path Kabeer Faye further mentions an encounter in Israel with a Kabbalistic rabbi who would not share his knowledge, especially with a female—

⁷⁹ Daniel 'Abd al-Hayy Moore (d. 2016) was an American Sufi poet whose life intersected with a number of movements in Western Sufism.

⁸⁰ Kabeer Faye, 35.

⁸¹ Kabeer Faye, 36.

⁸² This group is briefly described in Marcia Hermansen, "The 'other' Shadhilis of the West" in *Une voie soufie dans la monde: la Shadhiliyya*, ed. Eric Geoffroy, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2005, 492-493.

⁸³ Discussed in Marcia Hermansen, "The 'other' Shadhilis of the West" in *Une voie soufie dans la monde: la Shadhiliyya* ed. Eric Geoffroy, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2005, 491-492.

while the Sufi Shaykhs that she met were willing to teach her.⁸⁴

Back at Lama Noorudeen, her friend Noura⁸⁵ and she learn the Fatiha together:

I remember this time with great fondness and nostalgia because the Islam we were discovering was independent of any political or worldly context. There was no cultural or political overlay. We had been searching for the Way, the path of truth, for union with the Divine. Our creator had answered our yearnings and supplications by revealing to us the Way that all the prophets (as) had followed, each in his own time.”⁸⁶

Leaving Lama, in Philadelphia Kabeer Faye meets Guru Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (d. 1986) who is a major spiritual influence on her during the remainder of his life. She is invited to accompany him to Sri Lanka to work on a book. There she teaches Islamic prayer to others in the Fellowship of his disciples—leading, according to her narrative, to the ultimate Islamization of the group and project of building a mosque in Philadelphia of the group.⁸⁷ Eventually she married a follower of Bawa from South India, Ahamad Kabeer, who comes to Philadelphia and becomes the imam for the Bawa group there. After many efforts she finally has a child, Issa, born in 1987. With Issa accompanying her, Maryam later visits Kashmir, where she stays with families with whom she is engaged in importing tapestries and shawls. She describes her subsequent Umra to Saudi Arabia—and in the course of it recalls an identification with two powerful females in the Islamic tradition, Rabi’a al-Adawiyya and Hajar (Hagar), especially as she is taking care of her son while on the trip.

In the late 1990s Kabeer Faye begins to establish a connection with Senegal, eventually studying with a Senegalese Shaykh, Shaykh Dieye, since Bawa had died in 1986. Consistent with my thesis that there is a changing sense of spatiality emerging in these accounts, Kabeer Faye states:

When people ask me, “Where do you come from?” The answer is “From all the places I have been.” What we each are is a composite of all of the people and places we have visited and deeply embraced. Such is the mosaic of tiles of which our life is composed.

⁸⁴ Kabeer Faye, 111.

⁸⁵ Noura, who later married Noorudding Durkee, is a major figure in the biographical work by anthropologist Lois Banner in *Finding Fran*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁸⁶ Kabeer Faye, 120.

⁸⁷ Kabeer Faye, 183.

And these are the experiences in which the story of our life is told.⁸⁸

Among the many reflections interspersed in the narrative Kabeer Faye stresses the importance of place walking where they (holy ones) have walked and performing pilgrimage to their shrines.⁸⁹ While displaying what Foucault terms the ordered and hierarchical nature of pre-modern spatiality, it also makes the point of new trajectories in which the Western seeker can walk paths and enter sacred spaces that would previously been unknown and alien.

Presenting this phase in her journeying as coming full circle, Kabeer Faye revisits sites in India that were part of her earlier, pre-Islamic trajectory. In the shrine of Sufi 'Ali Hujwiri in Lahore, she reconnects with his text *Kashf-al-Mahjub* that had been a spiritual classic that had inspired her long before.⁹⁰

A severe illness precipitates her final reflections on life as an ultimate test. We humans have descended from the world of souls. Now in this life one must seek to be free for “we are in a prison from which we seek to be liberated.”⁹¹ She addresses the reader, “Whatever prison you have constructed. It is a psychological prison of layers and veils.”⁹² Her reflections are based on Islamic Sufi ideas of unveiling, going through the stages and states but in this process one must have a true Shaykh.⁹³ Only when the transformation is complete and the nafs (ego) has reached the station of true peace will it be invited by the Creator to enter the garden of Qur'an 89:27-30.

O Soul at Peace,
Return to your Lord
Pleased and well-pleasing
Enter the ranks of My worshippers—
Enter the garden.⁹⁴

Kabeer Faye's account is particularly autobiographical when she describes the end of life

⁸⁸ Kabeer Faye, 224.

⁸⁹ Kabeer Faye, 204.

⁹⁰ Kabeer Faye, 238.

⁹¹ Kabeer Faye, 252.

⁹² Kabeer Faye, 252.

⁹³ Kabeer Faye, 254-5.

⁹⁴ Kabeer Faye, 255.

experiences with each of her parents—a coming full circle psychological reflection on her relationship with her mother. Their difficult relationship is to an extent resolved at the end of her mother’s life when she feels a maternal blessing to have been sent out into the world to seek such that her early experience of deprivation from love was ultimately a gift.

Her conclusion reflects on impermanence, tragedy and disaster in the world, humans are in a “state of loss” as civilizations go astray from America’s inner cities to the Middle East and Africa. The way to eternal peace consists of the divinely provided instructions.

We need to read that manual, understand these instructions, and follow these directives, so that We may come to know the One who sent them and live our lives in harmony with Him will and in accomplishment of His will.⁹⁵

This is our way out of conflict, crisis, and destruction. Following the universal message of islam, *iman* (faith), and *ihsan* (doing things with beauty) as the true Sufi path.⁹⁶ The book concludes celebrating Kabeer Faye’s current Shaykh and his methods, especially his leading her on solitary retreats using practices involving the divine names. She alludes to current political situation when while stressing the role of the Prophet Muhammad as “a mercy to all the worlds” she condemns the egregious nature of children being trained in terrorism.⁹⁷

In concluding, Kabeer Faye addresses travellers or beginners to embark on the search for themselves, while Islam is her final destination, Kabeer Faye seems to leave more options open for her readers.

Conclusions

In his monograph on modern spiritual autobiography, David Leigh defines this genre as follows, “When this lifelong search for an ultimate reality that gives meaning to one’s life in the face of evil, suffering, and death becomes the theme of the book, then the writer has created a

⁹⁵ Kabeer Faye, 270.

⁹⁶ Kabeer Faye, 270.

⁹⁷ Kabeer Faye, 291.

‘spiritual autobiography’”.⁹⁸ The distinctiveness of twentieth century religious autobiographies, Leigh asserts, can be explained by the historical context, and he characterizes some of the century’s distinctive traits as being 1) alienation (religious) given the decline of a visible church presence; 2) autonomy (individual) that surfaces with “the breakdown of traditional hierarchical society” that historically defined the place of persons; 3) appropriation of faces—masks, selves—in the process of creating a self “out of nothing”; and 4) inauthenticity, or feeling the totalizing forces of society that overly determine one’s development. In response, the modern religious autobiographer, or “seeker” (as Leigh often describes these figures), struggles in search of (spiritual) meaning that will also involve “transformation of the social order to make room for both and freedom”.⁹⁹

The Western Sufi autobiographers treated here confront some of the same challenges of modern alienation but have chosen a specific response in converting not only to Islam, but to mystical Islam. This introduces some distinctive features into their experiences and accounts that involve their adoption of a new discipline of the body through following Islamic ritual and to an extent cultural norms to an extent these could be viewed separately, as well as their espousing a philosophy that considers the self both as a site of transformation and a potential obstacle to it. Surprisingly, their experiences, while coming from arguably the most religiously and spiritually based orientation possible, resonate with the new post-modern spatiality envisioned in a provocative and stimulating manner by Michel Foucault in the late 20th century.

The experiences that our authors choose to recount may be considered as instances of the East/West meetings that have made Islamic civilization and its mystical expression, Sufism, such a fecund arena for syncretic, creative, and novel expression of creative and religious impulses. At the same time these post-millennial 21st century encounters take place in a new globalized post-modern space that is itself fragmenting if not collapsing in onto itself, ironically dissolving along the lines that Sufi mystics aspire to in the case of annihilating the individual ego.

These Western Sufi autobiographical writings present a travelling Sufism for the new millennium in which deterritorialized practices communicated through migration/nomadism take root in new sites. In some cases these Sufi practices are performed in Western settings where

⁹⁸ David J. Leigh, *Circuitous Journeys: Modern Spiritual Autobiography*. Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2000, xi.

⁹⁹ Leigh, xiv

they are encountered, leading the authors who are touched by such stagings to travel to the Muslim world in order to undertake a process of transformation through discipleship and disciplining the body towards finding and annihilating the self. This self, however, is not stable in space as it seeks to overcome the oscillation between East and West while trying to transcend outer determinants of identity through the mystical quest.

Within the framework of this new spatiality, one still finds evidence of gender, class, and other elements of personal identity that shape these lives, their telling, and their messaging. Keller's experience is perhaps the most immanently political as he is constrained by the security apparatus of Hafiz al-Asad's Syria, in that he needs to avoid security apparatus surveillance, cross borders, and in some cases camouflage his religious identity. While in one anecdote Sugich attributes his success in persuading a Saudi prince who was the Minister of the Interior to grant an important personal petition to the blessing of Sufi invocation and blessing.¹⁰⁰

In terms of the role of the "East" and Islam in these writings the female authors considered here seem to have a less bifurcated sense of location. They also seem to more fluidly move back and forth geographically and psychologically so that their Islam, as well as their overall narratives, are less situated in an idealized, if fading, Muslim world. The females also seem to have less of a mission to call fellow Muslims to rediscover their Islamic past since their audience seems to be more explicitly Western spiritual seekers. While embracing Islam as the final and most complete spiritual path and identity, the female authors tend to make appeals to universalism and shared humanity that are missing from the male accounts.¹⁰¹

Keller is the most direct of our authors in describing the attainment of altered experiences of reality. For the others, the evidence of transcendence often seems to fall in the category of "synchronicity" or mysterious coincidences at an almost micro-level. But this very synchronicity is itself evidence of a new spatiality. Kabeer Faye's descriptions of the transcendent focus more on moments of confirmation of her attainments and recounting her dreams and visionary symbols.

¹⁰⁰ Sugich, 61-64.

¹⁰¹ This is not to imply that female converts to Islam are by nature more culturally accommodating. For example, we have the notable example of non-Sufi Maryam Jameela from the 1960s, who made a career out of condemning the West and pointing out its decadence to a largely Muslim readership.

The element of nostalgia for the Muslim World as the last refuge for true saints and spirituality in these accounts is reminiscence of Foucault's theory of the museum as a heterotopic space linked to the new reordered or disordered experiences of post-modern selves.

Foucault mentions the museum as heterotopia of time. It brings together disparate objects from different times in a single space that attempts to enclose the totality of time – a totality that is protected from time's erosion. The museum thus engages in a double paradox: it contains infinite time in a finite space, and it is both a space of time and a 'timeless' space seeking to freeze time in "period rooms" that slice time into "set pieces". A museum is a palimpsest, a continual accumulation of time, a heterotopia "in which time never stops building up and topping its own summit".¹⁰²

Particularly salient to our discussion of Westerners attempting to refresh themselves through practices, if you will, technologies, from an "Eastern" context is Foucault's brief but intriguing characterization of the ethnographic museum as "an example of both heterotopia of crisis and heterotopia of deviance in that such sites house collections of cultures and histories in an attempt to create a place outside time, and in that they attempt to describe the other—those deviating from the "western" norm."¹⁰³ Of course these post-millennial Western Sufi autobiographies are not frozen in actual space as is the specific site of an ethnographic museum—they are rather situated in individual life trajectories, sequences of specific and unique moments. In addition, our subjects are not merely contemplating the objects of others times and places. They are themselves paradoxically engaging in subversive or deviant behaviors that oppose elements of modern West norms that themselves have overflowed traditional cultural confines to erode what remains of an idealized authentic East.

Thus the experience of spiritually "going native" is that the Western individual has crossed over in order to discover through self-fashioning a reality that is considered superior, or more ultimately true. Accounts of this process notably feature nostalgia for a disappearing ideal and a portrayal of people, places, and affects that can somehow still be realized or grasped with great difficulty through extraordinary efforts. One strategy of the authors is to situate their new

¹⁰² Iwan Sudradjat. "Foucault, the Other Spaces, and Human Behaviour", 31.

¹⁰³ Iwan Sudradjat. "Foucault, the Other Spaces, and Human Behaviour", 31.

identity within either a cocoon or a shell—a cocoon would suggest a temporary stage towards a transformed state of being while a shell would suggest the rigid and bounded space of fiqh and compliance to Islam norms while eschewing much of what normalizes modern Western experiences. Thus the Islamic and the Sufi components of Sufi authenticity biographies are themselves spatial in how they view the role of identity boundaries and the necessity of taking action to either reinforce or dissolve them.

In another section in “Of Other Spaces”, Foucault further describes the microcosmic quality of the Islamic garden, with its four sections representing four different parts of the world. He even mentions Persian rugs, which, he explains, ‘were originally reproductions of gardens’.¹⁰⁴ We are invited to consider “the legendary value of magic carpets, rugs that roam the world. The garden is a carpet where the whole world has come to fulfill its symbolic perfection, and it is at the same time a garden moving through space,”¹⁰⁵ by allowing us to travel to the farthest corners of the earth, the garden image is able to give rise to an alternative configuration of space.¹⁰⁶

In her final chapter Kabeer Faye employs a number of images that evoke the heterotopic spaces of Foucault’s seminal article yet remind us of the resonances of such images in religious and spiritual traditions. In other words gardens and oases as symbolic sites are imagined as being outside of normal, if you will, non-heterotopic space. What makes these spaces fecund as religious or theoretical spaces are their making the imagined possible or religiously marking the sacred. Kabeer Faye, after much journeying arrives at the oasis—“a place of peace and of intensive training, of vital restoration and transformation”.¹⁰⁷ She contrasts this “flower garden” to the scarred surrounding world and attributes its flourishing to the internalization of the beauty and light of the *sunna* within the guided Sufi community/*umma* that she finds to be the source of this realization. Ultimately she describes this realm or station as “a special place” where what she has perceived as being on the outside becomes “a mirror reflecting what was coalescing

¹⁰⁴ Kelvin T. Knight “Placeless places: resolving the paradox of Foucault's heterotopia”, *Textual Practice*, April 2016, 6 citing Foucault “In Other Spaces”, 26.

¹⁰⁵ Michel Foucault, ‘Les Hétérotopies’, in Daniel Defert (ed.), *Le Corps utopique suivi de Les Hétérotopies* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Lignes, 2009), 23–24. Cited by Knight 6.

¹⁰⁶ Knight, 6.

¹⁰⁷ Kabeer Faye, 288.

within me.”¹⁰⁸ The last intriguing thought for this essay is therefore, did classical Sufi mysticism anticipate the simultaneity of the post-modern space being discovered by our authors, or are their forays on the mystic quest possible in this time, in Eastern spaces, in ways that they were not previously?

¹⁰⁸ Kabeer Faye, 295.

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